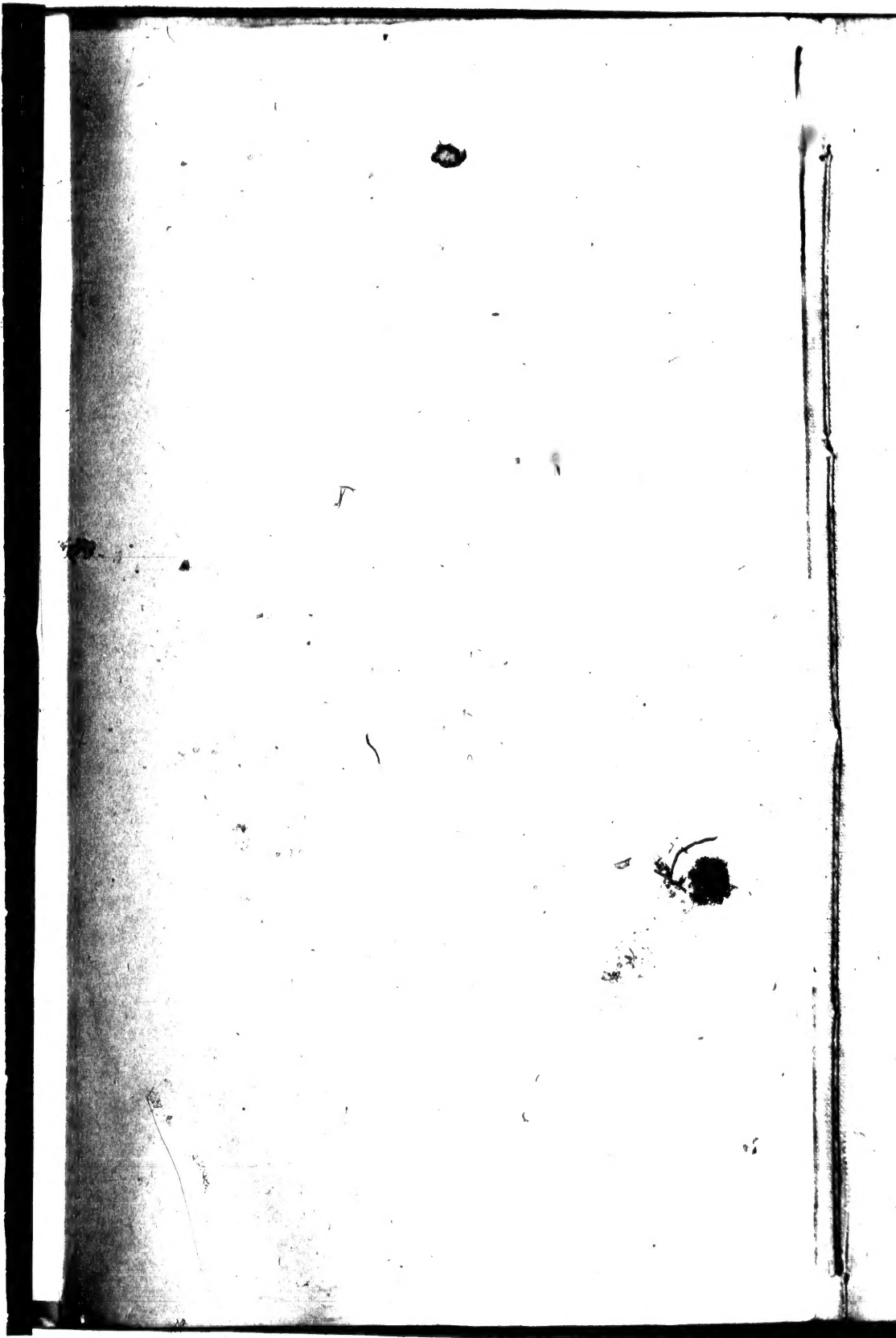




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A LECTURE

ON THE

HARPER'S FERRY TRAGEDY;

BY H. L. GORDON.

*Delivered in the Hall of the Mechanics' Institute, in Montreal,
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LECTURE.

The great Slavery question in the United States is not only a question of races, but one of incompatible civilizations. And ever since the formation of the Federal Union these two hostile civilizations have been fighting for political supremacy in the nation. In this light slavery is a political question, belonging to the whole country. It is also a question between the White man the master, and the Black man the slave. In this aspect of it, it is a question of morals, and belongs to the South. When or how the slave shall be liberated, is for the master and the slave to settle. The abolitionists of the north are not politicians. To be political the Constitution must be recognized and acknowledged to be law, this the abolitionists refuse to do, hence they are moralists and oppose slavery on philanthropic grounds. The Anti-Slavery party, now known by the name of Republican, is the truest exponent of Northern feeling on the subject of Slavery. Its main object is to get hold of the government of the country, to keep slavery within its present limits and extend the area of free civilization. The Abolitionists do not recognize the master's right to slave property. The Republicans do and have no desire to invade his dominion. The

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Abolitionists desire emancipation for the sake of the African. In their moral warfare against slavery, their eyes are kept upon the bondsman. The Republicans have no particular love for the African, but because slavery is opposed to the interests of white men and opposed to the growth and liberties of the white communities, they seek to check it by confining it to its present area. The South on the other hand is doing every thing in its power to enlarge its territory and to increase its power. It has generally succeeded in its attempts. By skilful management it identified itself at an early period with the Democratic party. This party is the most popular and the most national in the Republic. Popular because its name of itself secures the foreign vote, while its fundamental idea—the sovereignty of the State as opposed to the Central authority of the Union flatters State pride, and is perhaps the most popular political notion in America. National because it is a party at the South as well as at the North. Hence it is that what is called the Pro-Slavery power, (one of the names of the Democratic party), is united to the national sentiment of the Union. Its constant endeavour is to prove all other parties untrue to the Constitution. But it derives its main advantage from the powerful prejudice the American, both North and South entertains towards the negro race. By consummate management it turns this prejudice to account, and points out exultingly to the Anti-Slavery party of the country certain social

consequences of the success of liberal doctrines. Nothing cools the ardor of the Anti-Slavery party so much as the contemplation of elevating the black man to a level with the white and mingling the blood of the races together.

Brown understood thoroughly the issue between the South and the North, but his strong sympathies with the slave led him to adopt the views of the abolitionists, and when his sons were murdered in Kansas he stepped forth and took part in the conflict of arms. It was the valor of this enraged parent that saved the territory from the grasp of slavery. His sympathies for the slave now wore a sterner aspect. He resolved to invade the South. He spoke to a few of his confidential friends of his plan. It seems they gave him but little encouragement. But this did not dishearten him. How true the words of Horace, "not the rage of the people pressing to hurtful measures, not the aspect of the threatening tyrant can shake from his settled purpose the man that is just and determined in his resolution." To convince his friends that his plan was feasible, he made an experiment in Missouri, and was successful in bringing off a number of slaves, and landing them safely in Canada. From this he determined to try it on a larger scale. Accordingly in May 1858, he held a meeting of his confederates in Chatham, C. W. Here was drawn up a provisional constitution, from which it appears that his object was not, as is commonly supposed, a servile insurrection in the sanguinary sense of the

word, but to run off large bodies of slaves and protect the movement by an armed force. Shortly after the meeting in Chatham, he and two of his sons under the name of Smith took up their residence near Harper's Ferry.

Here he manages to receive his arms and ammunition from the north, and to hold communication with the slaves in the neighborhood. The night of October 16th comes, and Brown with twenty-one men (five of them colored), move upon the Ferry, quite a town containing a United States arsenal, with 100,000 stand of arms. Quietly this intrepid band walk into the arsenal and take it without firing a shot, citizens suspecting nothing, no guards on duty. One party takes possession of the bridge, another captures several wealthy planters in the vicinity, bringing them and their slaves to head-quarters. In the morning as fast as the workmen make their appearance they are taken prisoners. Thirty of them are captured before this remarkable community finds out that an enemy is in its midst. Very soon, however, the report spread abroad that an army of many hundreds was in the arsenal, and that all the slaves were in arms! It was at this point that the Chivalry of the Old Dominion forgot its ancient valor. Military companies poured in from all quarters. It took them thirty-six hours to release a few prisoners, to shoot two men, one of them an unarmed man. Finally, on the morning of the 18th the United States marines with amazing courage, entered

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the engine house held by Brown and his eighteen men. Nineteen of the insurgents were killed, seven captured, including Brown himself who was severely wounded. Two made good their escape. Bills of indictment were found by a Virginia Court against all the prisoners except Hazlett and Stephens, who were handed over to the Federal or United States Courts. They were charged with inciting the slaves to insurrection, with treason and murder, and were sentenced to death. Brown was executed on the 2nd of December, and the four others on the 16th of the same month. How bravely he died you all know. The world knows it, and calls him insane. If he had succeeded, however, in conducting several thousands of slaves out of Virginia into the North, instead of calling him crazy, men would have bestowed on his genius and plan as they do now on his courage, the highest praise. People ask what could he have expected to accomplish with a mere handful of men against a powerful state. Saying nothing about those from the North who had promised him support *he calculated upon large numbers of slaves joining him.* Why did they disappoint him? I think these are the reasons: 1. He took the slave too much by surprise. There was not sufficient time taken to prepare him for the movement. White men taking slaves out of the South by a moral Exodus was a thing entirely new to the slave. It had for him no precedent had never entered into his hopes. To secure his confidence Brown re-

quired a much longer time than a few months. 3. The place of operations was badly chosen. In his Missouri experiment Brown had found the slaves ready and willing to follow him. But the Kansas border war had made the Missouri slave acquainted with a class of Anti-Slavery men and with a mode of conducting Anti-Slavery operations entirely unknown to the slave of Virginia. Besides slavery wears a milder aspect in Northern and Northwestern Virginia than in parts further South. The Northern line is close by, and the master is obliged to treat him well to keep him. Brown's chances of success in my opinion would have been better in almost any other part of the South. The clearest intellect might have made the mistakes I have alluded to. The most illustrious generals have been found guilty of errors far greater. Alexander the Great after penetrating with his victorious arms into the heart of Asia, committed a serious blunder in sailing down the Indus on his way back, and attempting the frightful deserts of Gedrosia. He lost three-fourths of his army. Napoleon remained thirty-four days in Moscow, delaying his retreat too long, and the grand army was destroyed in the midst of stern winter. Hunger, cold and exhaustion produced greater ravages than Russian bullets and Cossack lances. Our material age mistakes heroism for insanity. The Greek Leonidas, the Roman Regulus and the British Ridley appeared each in his day insane to the crowd, but at this distance they look glorious, and the

future will rank the hero of Harper's Ferry amongst them.

To understand him and to appreciate him, observes an eminent writer, it is necessary to place ourselves as near as possible to his position and look at slavery as he viewed it. For more than twenty-five years he had been reflecting on the horrors of slavery. And in imagination he had dwelt in the midst of its awful scenes. The flesh galled by the iron and cut by the lash, the fierce scent of blood hounds in pursuit of the panting fugitive, the cruel separation of husband and wife, of parent and child, of brother and sister, the slave without home, without family, deprived of every sacred right, no equivalent for his labor, no reward for his industry, and the gates of knowledge closed against him, were to him awful realities. He had read the Slave Code. It told him that the slave was entirely in his master's power. That the master might sell him, dispose of his person, his industry and his labor, that he could do nothing, own nothing, but what must belong to his master; that the slave was adjudged in law to be a chattel personal in the hands of his owner, possessor, or his executors, administrators and assignees to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever. He had read the works of eminent judges, and they told him that the slave was not to be ranked with sentient beings, but among things, and that this was a cardinal principle of slavery. In the public assemblies of the nation he had listened to the cruel arguments

of slave holders. That the negro belonged to an inferior order of beings, an order created for slavery. That it was his destiny to pass through slavery into civilization, he had heard them speak of the happiness and contentment of the slave, how well he was fed and clad and cared for in his old age, and how superior his condition was to that of the free negro, and finally that the Bible sanctioned slavery, and that the constitution guaranteed to the master his rights in slave property. John Brown, however, had a manly Christian heart and a clear logical head. When he was told of the inferiority of the negro he replied, more the reason for the exercise of benevolence towards him, When told that the negro was created for slavery he replied that there was no more proof for it than for the fitness of the white man himself for slavery, against whose liberty tyrants had often used the very same argument. "If," said he, "the negro is to reach civilization through slavery, the master will as certainly reach slavery through the civilization that fostered it. Why degrade the white man in order to elevate the black? Admitting that the physical condition of the slave is good, he is still a moral and intellectual being, possessing faculties which require liberty for their development and growth. True it may be that he sometimes prefers slavery to freedom, yet this only furnishes an argument against his enslavement. It proves that slavery so degrades the moral and intellectual nature of the slave that

the distinction between freedom and slavery is obliterated from his mind." John Brown was a Bible student and was too well informed not to see that an essential difference existed between Bible Servitude and American Slavery. He believed the Bible to be an Anti-Slavery book. The contrary belief would have been exceedingly dangerous to his religious faith. The politician argued in vain to him of the rights of the master in his slave property. With a distinguished British Statesman, he said "tell me not of rights. Talk not to me of the property of the planter in his slaves, I deny the right. I acknowledge not the property. In vain you tell me of laws that sanction such a claim. There is a law above all the enactments of human codes. The same throughout the universe, the same in all times. It is the law written by the finger of God upon the heart of man, and by that law unchangeable and eternal, while men despise fraud, loathe rapine, and abhor blood, they will reject with indignation the wild and guilty phantasy that man can hold property in man."

We are told that he was a lineal descendant of the English puritans. Like them the sufferings through which he had passed had introduced an iron hardness into his resolution, had irritated him, and had roused into life and activity the revolutionary spirit within him. Earnest in his religious convictions, constant in his study of the Bible, like Luther his conscience was imprisoned in God's Word. Tender hearted, and a lover of

liberty, his sympathies were easily enlisted in behalf of the weak and oppressed. Possessed of a daring spirit, he looked upon the most hazardous enterprises without alarm. He believed with Wesley that slavery is the sum of all villanies. He regarded it as a state of piracy, and the government that sanctioned it a government of wickedness. He was a thorough American, and believed in revolutions. He knew that his country for a far less cause arose in arms against the authority of Britain. His family had furnished soldiers for the conflict. Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God, said his countrymen then and he believed them to be great and good men, worthy of all imitation. He loved the African race. The brotherhood of man was a cardinal principle of his religion. The equality of all men before the law the fundamental principle of his politics. Hence he thought the black had as much right to his liberty as the white man, *and had the same right to fight for it.* He knew that if the slave were white, an act to free him, no matter how many constitutions and laws were to be broken to reach him, would meet with applause, and reflecting upon God's justice he resolved to do something for the bondsman. Of him it might be said with truth—

"Straight forward goes the lightning's path and straight the fearful path of the cannon ball."

Those who condemn his principles and his act must admit the honesty and sincerity of his motives, and that his fidelity, dignity, and courage,

and the sublime faith in which he died, encircle his memory with redeeming light.

The important question now arises :—Has he advanced the cause of liberty? Has he forwarded the interests of the Anti-Slavery enterprise? I think he has. He has given the world an heroic example. A greater gift he could not have bestowed. Socrates, the best man of the Ancients, was accused by the Sophists of corrupting the youth and of introducing false gods, and when condemned to death, instead of imploring his judges with tears as was then the custom, he bravely told them that he deserved to be ranked with the most illustrious men. When his friends urged him to fly, he rejected their counsel, and with an eloquent discourse on the immortality of the soul, he drank the poison. Brown, like Socrates, scorned to sue for his life, and told a Sovereign State that he asked no favor of her. As the living generation is inspired to glorious deeds by the death of the Greek, so will future generations be animated to like deeds by the steadfast courage of the American.

He has demonstrated one great truth, namely, that slavery rests upon an insecure basis. That it rests on cowardice, cruelty and meanness. Aristotle said that when a despot ascended the throne, he took a beast with him. This torch of northern fire hurled into the camp of despotism, has exposed to the view of the world the hideous features of the enthroned beast. Christendom sickened at the sight, and at this moment hates oppression more than ever before.

Behold a new born hope for the African, bond and free! He now knows that it is possible for a white man to love him and to die for him if need be. Never was assurance more needed. In a state of freedom even the condition of the coloured man is a deplorable one. The ancient slave had his master's complexion. The only distinction between them was removed when the slave was set at liberty. The highest stations were then within his reach, his child might by genius or wealth wipe out forever the stain of degradation. Horace, the son of a freedman was the associate of noblemen and kings. In America the master is white and the slave black, and the distinction of color is added to that of slavery. Slavery is transient, color is fixed. When the African changes his condition he does not change his color. Prejudice, therefore, fastens upon this only remaining distinction and badge of degradation. I think it becomes more intense as the black is elevated by the laws to political equality. For prejudice of race is stronger at the north than it is at the south, stronger against the free man than the slave, and is in fact in the free states of the North an insuperable barrier between the two races. The colored freedman's child possesses wealth or genius in vain. He is born in a country where every avenue to social eminence is closed against him, and where his chief inheritance is his parent's misfortunes. Freedom then, it would seem, instead of joining the two races separates them.

I hope that the love of John Brown and his heroic death will prove a blessing to the free coloured man, and enable him to act in the presence of his difficulties like a man.

Then there is the slave ; he cannot be shut out from the knowledge of what is going on around him. He will perceive his master's alarm and soon discover its cause. He will see him watching an enemy, and in a short time he will welcome this enemy as his friend. There are Gabriels, Vesey's and Turners on the plantations of the south, teaching their companions in chains what Thales is said to have taught his disciples : to be watchful of opportunities.

Southern men used to think Northern men cowards, and that the abolitionists were great talkers, but not disposed to sacrifice much for the cause they talk so earnestly about. But since a self-sacrificing old man made them tremble beneath his eagle glance, they will think more highly of the class which he represented. The abolitionists too will entertain a higher opinion of their mission, and move with a more manly port in the presence of the nation. They will speak braver words, and live in contemplation of nobler deeds. The Anti-Slavery spirit of the North already assumes grander proportions. Like the Afrite of the Eastern tale, it may have seemed to the slave-power only a bottle of smoke ; but that smoke is now let loose upon the air, is raising its head into clouds ; its hands are becoming winnowing forks, its nostrils trumpets, and its eyes a consuming fire.

Thousands hitherto indifferent to the Anti-Slavery enterprise, will now be drawn within the circle of its discussion. Men are seriously asking themselves what is the nature of the evil which J. Brown sought to remove. When Tiberius Gracchus travelled through Italy, on his way to join the army before Numantia, he discovered that the great mass of the citizens of the rural districts was impoverished and the fields desolate, by the existence of slavery. He proposed to terminate its evils by a simple, just, and practicable law, which should build up in the midst of the luxurious Roman nobles and their abused slaves, an independent and virtuous yeomanry. Southern men will now be led to inquire into the true character of slavery, and, like Tiberius, make the discovery that the great body of white citizens of the rural districts are kept in poverty and in ignorance by it; that, as in Rome, its effects are becoming every day more and more apparent among the higher orders; that it is fast corrupting the virtue of families, destroying domestic life, and diminishing the frequency of marriages among the dominant caste; that the slave population is gaining, by inevitable law, in relative numbers; that it is fostering an injurious pride and the habit of luxury, and increasing daily the facilities of licentious gratification; that the very worst effects of it operate principally, and, in some instances exclusively, on the white man himself. It is to be hoped that, unlike the Romans who refused, the Americans

will adopt some practicable method of emancipation, else there may arise ere long an African Spartacus with as much courage and with more virtue than his Roman namesake. It would be well for the South to bear in mind that Toussaint Loverture is a great historic character.

I know that Roman slavery was not abolished by servile insurrection, and, not being able to fathom the designs of Heaven, I am far from feeling certain that it will remove the cruel despotism of America. But I do know that God is just and his laws invincible. Slavery destroyed Roman civilization, the force and dignity of which we so much admire. I fear it will destroy that of my native land. The alarm bell in the heavens has pealed forth another loud and solemn note. There is yet time. But bye and bye emancipation will be as dangerous as slavery.

There are those who desire to see the agitation of the question quieted, and who go so far as to express their determination to effect it. How foolish. When Paris carried off in a Trojan ship the beautiful Helen, Nereus, it is said, suppressed the swift winds into a calm that he might sing to them their dire fates. Heaven, in like manner, may suffer the agitation to cease, may suppress the swift winds of angry debate now sweeping over the Republic, and, in the silence, pronounce the tyrant's doom.

There are those again who expect, and not only expect but threaten, the dissolution of the Union of the American States. The Union is

not so easily dissolved. The wisest men of the South, where it is talked of most, do not desire it, even if it were possible. The free States are too powerful to allow the slave section to withdraw from the Union without their consent. The dissolution of the Union, logically speaking, means civil war. Suppose for a moment a Republican President elected, and the South foolish enough to attempt withdrawal from the confederation, we should soon see 100,000 Northern troops on its frontiers, and how long would it take them to bring the revolting States to their senses? Not long. The presence of Northern troops on Southern soil would mean more than civil war. It would mean a war of liberation. This would be the inevitable result of a conflict of arms between the North and South. An old man and a handful of followers shot terror into every planter's home. Fifteen hundred men dared not for a whole day attack this resolute band. It took the whole military power of the Old Dominion to keep J. Brown in prison and to hang him. It kept her chivalry busy, and excited, even to alarm, to keep at a safe distance, a few Yankee reporters, artists, and old ladies, and guard the State from the attack of *imaginary* foes. What then would become of the Southerners in a war of liberation with the North? Treason and the gallows staring them in the face, and a powerful army in their midst, bearing aloft the standard of liberation, would not only reduce them to cowardice, but would annihilate their system. The

South dare not attempt to dissolve the Union, and, inside of the Union, it must submit to its destiny. Slavery cannot last forever. The civilization of the North is irresistible, because it expresses the will of God. It is driving the dark despotism of this continent further and further towards the torrid belt. Nothing can prevent the Africanization of the tropics, and this concentration of the blacks, in vast numbers in the hot regions, will solve the American problem: because it will establish a free black empire, and inaugurate a new order of civilization.

In conclusion, permit me to say that I have not the language to express my admiration of that Constitution which at this moment is giving protection to the oppressed of all lands. I mean the free Constitution of Great Britain. The debt of gratitude which I owe it I can never hope to repay. Happy are you inhabitants of this free and growing province, Britain's fairest daughter, happy in the inheritance of her language, her history, and her literature—happier still in the possession of her free and glorious Constitution. What a mighty empire is yours. Your national anthem encircles the globe. The sun in his course through the heavens never forsakes your sovereign's dominion; but blesses it with a constant light. Yet not on account of boundless empire, not because your flag rejoices in the winds of every clime, not because your commerce adorns every coast, and your navies ride triumphant on every sea, is Britain great.

These things are grand it is true ; but they do not constitute the essential element of national greatness. British history abounds in acts of moral heroism, in examples of mercy and goodness. In obedience to the Christian religion and the spirit of the Constitution, the nation arose above the suggestions of material gain, and, by an act unsurpassed in moral grandeur, abolished forever British slavery. The moment a slave breathes your free air he is a free man. The moment an exile touches your shores the genius of liberty attends him, and protects him evermore from the cruel tyrant. Hence the greatness and glory of the British empire. Continue free, benevolent, and brave, and Heaven will continue to bless you with riches, success, and renown.

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